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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, MARCH 28 - APRIL 3

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¶1. This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

KICK HIM WHILE HE'S DOWN

¶2. Sergey Tupitsyn, until recently an aspiring, well-regarded local politician and activist, has experienced a rapid fall from grace. A member of the Pavlodar maslikhat (city council), chairman of Nur Otan party's youth wing in Pavlodar oblast, a member of the government's Council for Youth Issues, winner of multiple state award and prizes, and holder of four advanced degrees, Tupitsyn was dismissed from the Nur Otan party under accusations of "megalomania." Tupitsyn has also been sentenced to two years of imprisonment for beating up his neighbor. One of the most respected party members suddenly has become a pariah.

¶3. "Tupitsyn chairs an association, which includes 13 NGOs. The association was always winning tenders and receiving government orders worth millions," one of his former colleagues now claims. "In March 2008, several officials from Pavlodar's city administration said that Tupitsyn pressured them to grant government tenders to his affiliates. If they refused to give the grants, the head of the council's revision commission would start endless inspections."

¶4. "We have received complaints from citizens, accusing Tupitsyn of megalomania," another former colleague says. "A survey on the work of the town council and its members, held by the regional management school public foundation, showed that people view Tupitsyn as an arrogant, haughty man, driving a foreign car with tinted windows. The administration of Pavlodar gave him a new Ford Mondeo for official business, but the car was mostly seen at night and near restaurants."

"MISBEHAVING" BOY PUT IN "SOLITARY" DETENTION

15. A "misbehaving" seven-year old child spent several hours in the "solitary confinement" of a tiny office in a village school near Aktobe after his teacher locked him in and conveniently "forgot" about the boy. According to the boy's parents, he spent more than three hours in the office and was only able to escape when he broke through a window. To add insult to injury, the school has demanded that the boy's parents pay for the window that the first-grader broke. In a statement explaining the incident, the teacher pleaded ignorance and claimed that she did not notice that the boy was missing. However, according to the director of local Department for Children's Rights, that would not be an easy feat since the village school only has a total of 20 students, and just six of those attend the first grade.

POLICE AND SPECIAL FORCES FREE HOSTAGE

16. The economic crisis has been causing people to find increasingly creative ways to earn money. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that property crime has increased as well. In a joint operation, the Almaty police department and the government's Arlan special forces unit freed a 32-year old hostage who was kidnapped several weeks ago and held for 16 days in a basement near Almaty. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$80,000 in exchange for the man's life. The businessman from Almaty was abducted in broad daylight, when several masked men in a black BMW cut him off while he was crossing a street and then forced him into their car. After a thorough beating, the hostage was forced to phone his parents and ask them to pay the ransom. The parents did not turn to the police for ten days and tried to negotiate with the kidnappers on their own. Failing in that effort, they finally involved the police, who established contact with the kidnappers. In a meeting where the ransom money was to be dropped off, all the kidnappers were captured. They are currently awaiting trial.

SHYMKENT'S PASTRY CHEFS BUILD GIANT YURT CAKE

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17. Local pastry chefs gave an unusual and possibly record-setting present to the residents of Shymkent, a city in southern Kazakhstan. For the Nauryz (Persian New Year) holiday, 35 chefs "built" a two-meter-tall yurt made out of honey, dough, raisins and nuts. To build the giant cake, they used 2,650 eggs, 370 pounds of flour, 205 liters of vegetable oil, 11 pounds of each nuts and raisins, and 160 pounds of each sugar and honey. Since no car was big enough to actually carry the cake, the chefs had to load it onto an excavator to drive it to Shymkent's main square. Despite the possible record-setting size of the yurt cake, its creators do not plan to pursue an entry into the Guinness Book of World Records. "Our main task is to keep people in good spirits," said Elena Kharitidi, one of the organizers of the event.

HOAGLAND